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NOTES ON ISAIAH 1:18b AND 7:14b-16.

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Isaiah 1:18b.—R. V., “though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” Cheyne translates: “If your sins be scarlet, they may become white as snow; be they red as crimson, they may become as wool.” In both renderings the possibility of forgiveness is implied or expressed; in the second there is a suggestion of conditions attaching to the forgiveness, while in the first the certainty expressed ignores any conditions. The second is preferable, as it takes into account the context in vss. 19, 20. Cheyne’s note to vs. 18b is: “How this can be effected we learn from vss. 19, 20. A change of life would avert the threatened punishment.” This common explanation of vs. 18 involves as a minimum the removal, by Yahweh, of the guilt of the sinner on condition of his becoming “willing and obedient.” But vs. 19b states expressly what is the conclusion of that (changed) condition: “Ye shall eat the good of the land.” Have we interpreted the last part of the two lines of vs. 18b correctly?

At first sight the similarity in form of vss. 18b, 19, 20 would seem to argue for the common explanation. But the similarity is formal only. The conditional clauses in vss. 18b and 19 are not synonymous, and the conclusions need not be. There is no occasion to interpret those of vs. 18b as expressing Yahweh’s forgiveness of sin, because vs. 19b states what will be the fortune of the willing and obedient Israelite. This latter verse is in entire harmony with the prophet’s message given in this chapter: the former verse, as usually interpreted, assumes a strange interruption to Isaiah’s course of thought, however little spirituality may be conceded it.

The suggestion which we venture is to make the last half of the two lines of vs. 18b parallel with the condition of vs. 19. Willingness and obedience form the condition of eating the good of the land. Such a state of mind is not the condition or means

of "snow-whiteness;" it is snow-whiteness itself. For the securing of it the sinner, guilty Israel, is responsible. Of course, this thought calls for a jussive force for the verbs under consideration. "If your sins be scarlet, let them be white as snow. If they be red as crimson, let them be as wool. If ye are (thus) willing and obedient, ye shall eat the fruit of the land."

We have thus far considered the verse from the point of view of the succeeding context, led to this course by Cheyne's note. What is the foregoing context? Israel's forms of worship are obnoxious to Yahweh when employed by men whose lives were sinful. Disaster is overtaking their land; they pray to Yahweh, but the hands they lift to him are red with blood. "I cannot grant your prayer for prosperity and deliverance from affliction." What will secure them a hearing and an answer? The answer is short and sharp. Wash those blood-stained hands. Abandon your evil doings; practice uprightness, justice, kindness. This they must do as a condition of Yahweh's answering their prayers. The terminology down to vs. 17 is not that of heart-repentance, of divine forgiveness of past sins. The life and conduct is to be corrected *by the petitioner* before he can expect his prayer for temporal prosperity to be heard. This correction of the life and conduct is within the power of the man to make. It is laid upon him as an obligation to perform.

This brings us to vs. 18. "Let us reason together." What is the subject involved in the summons נִכְחֶה of Yahweh? The temptation is strong to answer the question in accordance with our preconceived ideas of the meaning of the verse. But really there is abundant latitude for any interpretation which may otherwise commend itself.

The common explanation supposes that between vss. 17 and 18 the attitude of the Israelite has changed. Conviction of sin has followed the prophet's vigorous language of the preceding section. But there is no hint in the opening words of the verse that there is such change, or that the following thought is a new one. The analogy of prophetic utterance is abundantly satisfied if the prophet is to proceed to reiterate his former truth, especially if he elaborates or strengthens his case thereby. This increased emphasis is certainly secured by the literary fiction of a hearing at which Yahweh states his case fully. We are then not bound to find in vs. 18 an advance in thought.

As we come to examine the second part of the verse, we must do the well-nigh impossible, and forget our familiar "though" as a translation of the simple **אם** "if." "If your sins be as scarlet," what then? A second state is mentioned—"white as snow." Of course, the two clauses do not mean that a sin can be, now scarlet, and then snow-white. They mean that a man may now have great sin, and then be without sin; not a scarlet sin now, and then a snow-white sin; rather, you Israelites now sinful, and then sinless, unstained with sin. The figure employed evidently comes from the preceding verses; there it is concrete, here it is developed into an abstract proposition. If we go to vss. 15, 16 for the figure, why not go to the same source for the thought also? There a washing is contemplated, but without more ado the bloody-handed Israelite is commanded to wash his own hands. They have been leading wicked lives; they are bidden live righteous lives—a very simple and practical demand, not beset by any theological difficulties.

"If your sins be as scarlet"—what is the most natural thing for Isaiah to say next? What would be expected from a prophet who has written vss. 15, 16, 17, and is in vss. 19, 20 to bring his main contention to a climax with the forcible, "The mouth of Yahweh hath spoken it"? Is it not to be expected that he will say, "If your sins be as scarlet, let them become white as snow"? That this is his burden seems to the writer increasingly probable.

Isaiah 7:14b, 15, 16.—The following suggestion is hazarded in the somewhat uncertain search for the original form and meaning of the celebrated chapter. The verses may have been removed from an original location before vs. 9b. The reasons that prompt the suggestion may be stated in brief. They certainly do not amount to a proof of the correctness of the hypothesis, but are presented nevertheless:

1. The verses cited do not have good connection forward or backward. At least vss. 14b and 16 are promises of blessing, of deliverance from danger by the power and presence of Yahweh with his people. Vs. 15 is by some taken otherwise. Upon what Old Testament passages their view can be based is not clear. In Gen., chap. 18; Deut., chap. 32; Judg., chap. 5; 2 Sam., chap. 17; Job, chap. 20, butter and milk are indicative of abundance. They form part of the hospitality accorded to the

honorable. No one can think that the sacred writers meant a famine-stricken or devastated land when they referred to Canaan as a land flowing with milk and honey. The strong presumption is that the verse before us corresponds to its immediate context. The force of the terms in vss. 21, 22 is less clear if the context of these verses is to be considered. If they are taken independently, the impression created by them is certainly that of abundance, although כל הנותר may be taken to suggest that a depopulation has previously occurred. The context of vs. 15 contains no such connotation, and there is no occasion for rejecting the verse as a gloss on the ground of its incongruity with the favorable predictions of vss. 14 and 16. The character of vss. 14b, 16 is, however, not affected by the disposition made of vs. 15.

Vss. 12, 13, however, lead us to expect a prediction of evil to follow. Asked by the prophet to ask a sign by which his faith in Yahweh might be strengthened, Ahaz refuses. He does not believe, and he will not expose himself to conditions which may make belief necessary. This perversity of the king is met by a natural outburst of impatient rebuke. He "wearies" not only man (the prophet?), but the prophet's God also, by his obstinacy. Neither the prophet's language in vs. 14a nor temper of mind exhibited in vs. 13 allows us to take the giving of the sign to be in the same spirit as in vs. 11. If the אלה there would show the blessings to follow obedience, the אלה here would show the penalties of Ahaz' present disobedience. Into such a course of thought vss. 14b-16 intrude awkwardly.

The following context is no less awkward. The solemn introduction of the principal thought of vs. 17, and the comparison of the future with the schism between Judah and Israel, a grievous misfortune as interpreted by the prophets, and especially in evidence just now when Israel was arrayed against Judah, permit but one explanation of the verse. The lack of an introductory conjunction, in itself suspicious, is no more noticeable than the lack of logical connection.

2. Not only does the passage in question lack good connection, but if it is removed the remainder gains in continuity. The omission of connective at the beginning of vs. 17, disturbing in its present sequence, becomes natural and necessary if vs. 17 follows vs. 14a (הנה may stay with vs. 17 or go with vs. 14b). The strong *a priori* expectation of a threat of evil to come as a punishment

for Ahaz' perversity is perfectly met by the new connection. An **אוֹת** is not of necessity a supernatural event (indeed the Immanuel sign as now explained is without miraculous quality) or an immediate event (the former reference of the child Immanuel was to Jesus of Nazareth centuries later), and no objection can be raised to the prophet's calling the devastation of Judah a sign if he choose; true, it is the substance of the prediction and not simply a sign, but such use we meet elsewhere, and here the form of the revelation is an easy development of the earlier verses of the section.

3. The foreignness of vss. 14b-16 to its present context has some degree of possibility from considerations already mentioned. Even if no better context can be found for it, they still have their weight, undiminished; if a suitable context can be found, they are greatly increased. The proposed original location is before the final clause of 7:9. The suggestion is made with extreme hesitation because of the disorder which characterizes that section and the consequent impossibility of fixing, with any confidence, upon the prophet's course of thought; and without any effort to reduce the resulting passage to a literary form, consistent in details, because no new difficulties are introduced by the proposed transposition.

Ewald suggests to insert, "but Judah's head is Jerusalem, and Jerusalem's head is Yahweh," after vs. 9a. He is led to this suggestion by the difficulty of **כִּי** (vs. 8) otherwise; he also claims that the words which would be suitable here must be few and forcible. Very likely vss. 14b-16 would not meet his notion; certainly their form is very different from his suggestion; but our reference to Ewald is to show that the propriety of a reference here to Judah and Yahweh's protection was felt by him.

Cheyne is still more significant. He says: "The writer of the gloss [vs. 8b] (. . .) may, however, have been right in his impression that the text as it stood was incomplete." Again: "We must suppose that here too [before vs. 10] something has fallen out of the text or been omitted—a view which is confirmed by the formula prefixed to vs. 10." This, he thinks, must have been nearly equivalent to the closing words of vs. 16. "In vss. 17-25 his language is deterrent; in the lost passage which should precede vs. 10 it was probably of a persuasive character." "Isaiah may have spoken somewhat thus: 'Wherefore shouldst thou seek

help afar off? Is there no God in Israel who is mighty to save? Yet a very little while and the fortress shall cease from Ephraim, and the kingdom from Damascus. Dost thou not even yet trust the divine promise? Then ask thee a sign from Yahwè thy God.'” One can only wonder that Cheyne should not mention, here or later in his discussion of vss. 14*b*-16, the possibility that this section is the lost passage which in his judgment so closely resembles it.

Speaking independently, it seems natural that vs. 9 should contain a reference to Judah's great king Yahweh, who would destroy the enemies of his people. Our Immanuel section furnishes that thought. Vs. 8*b* is proven by its form and location to be a gloss. And yet some idea of the time when the deliverance should come is more than natural. The Immanuel section contains it, and that in an unobjectionable form and, put after vs. 9*a*, in an unobjectionable place (so far as this point is concerned). The words are forcible, as Ewald demands, though not exactly few.

4. If a reasonable occasion can be suggested for the displacement of the passage in the course of its history, still more plausible will the theory be.

Can such suggestion be made for this case? The miraculous in the career of the coming Messiah and his reign was more and more emphasized. The Septuagint *παρθένος* for *עלמה* shows this principle at work on this passage. What more natural than that, when the immediate value of the section was swallowed up in the Messianic value, it should seem more fitting that it should be placed after the *אִרָה*? Without doubt it is purely and simply its connection with *אִרָה* which has prevented the suggestion of a break at this point, has kept it in its awkward position between vss. 11-14*a* and vs. 17. And yet the attempt to get back beyond its derived to its original value has, it would seem, revealed a possible line of cleavage just at that place.